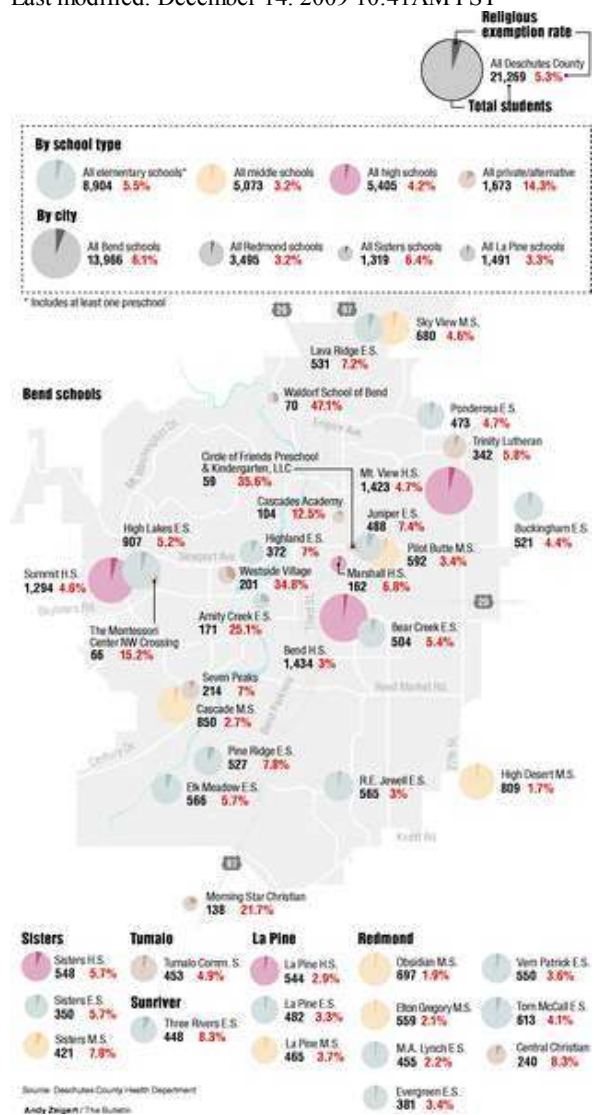


Deschutes kids forgoing shots

The county has one of the highest exemption rates in the state, with several schools in Bend leading the way. What's this mean for the children and the schools?

By [Hillary Borrud](#) / *The Bulletin*

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See large version of this graphic at bottom of article.

Immunization rates in Deschutes County schools

Deschutes County has one of the highest immunization exemption rates in the state and the fourth-highest rate for kindergartners, at 7.4 percent in 2009, according to the state Department of Human Services. The state average is 4.9 percent. A few schools in Bend have the largest clusters of students with exemptions.

At the Waldorf School of Bend, nearly one out of every two students is missing at least one required immunization.

At Westside Village Magnet School in Bend, one out of every three students is missing at least one vaccine normally required by schools. State records on the number of children who receive exemptions from immunization show Deschutes County has one of the highest rates in the state, and a few schools in Bend have the largest clusters of students with exemptions. At the same time, the county's rate of immunization among younger children is on the rise.

Many parents who opt out of some or all immunizations that schools require do so because of health concerns, such as the beliefs that children's immune systems grow stronger without vaccines or that vaccines contain toxins. But a pediatrician and a principal in Bend said diseases are more likely to spread in schools with many children missing some or all of their shots.

“Those underimmunized populations are the ones that get diseases,” said Dr. Peter Boehm, a pediatrician at Mosaic Medical Bend.

The Waldorf School of Bend has the highest rate in the county of exemptions from immunization, at 47.1 percent. Circle of Friends Preschool & Kindergarten LLC is the second highest with exemptions for 35.6 percent of students, Westside Village Magnet School is third at 34.8 percent, Amity Creek Magnet School is fourth at 25.1 percent and Morning Star Christian School is fifth at 21.7 percent, according to state data.

“Deschutes (County) is among the highest rates as far as exemptions,” said Stacy de Assis Matthews, immunization school law coordinator for the state Department of Human Services. The county's 2009 kindergarten exemption rate is 7.4 percent, while the state average is 4.9 percent. The counties with higher exemption rates than Deschutes County this year are Wallowa County with 14.3 percent, Josephine County with 11.5 percent and Hood River County with 8.7 percent, de Assis Matthews said.

'A personal choice'

Judy Powers, office manager at the Waldorf School of Bend, said she has noticed the high number of parents seeking exemptions from immunization.

“It is a personal choice for their family, because they don't feel that adding anything extra to a child's body is a good thing,” Powers said. “They understand, and I make it very clear, that if there were to be an epidemic here in Central Oregon, that they may be asked not to go to school.”

Powers said parents whose children are up to date with their immunizations have not expressed concerns to her about the school's high immunization exemption rate.

By the time children enter school, they are required to receive 19 shots with vaccinations for 32 separate diseases, Boehm said. At schools with high exemption rates, many parents work in alternative medicine or choose naturopathic and homeopathic health care for their families, administrators said. Parents at these schools also spend time researching immunization issues, in many cases on Web sites. State rules provide religious exemptions when “the child is being reared as an adherent to a religion, the teachings of which are opposed to such immunization,” but many local parents seek the exemption because of health concerns, administrators, parents and health workers said.

So far, Deschutes County has not experienced any disease outbreaks associated with unimmunized children, said Heather Kaisner, the county's immunization program coordinator. There have been outbreaks of disease linked to unimmunized children elsewhere in the nation, however, such as a 2008 outbreak of measles in San Diego in which 12 children became ill. The parents of nine children had opted out of having them vaccinated, and the other three children were too young to receive vaccines.

Kaisner and other health workers said they try to provide reliable information to parents so they can make informed choices about immunization, but the decision is ultimately up to the parents.

Why parents opt out

The two most common reasons parents give for opting out of some or all immunizations for their children are the beliefs that vaccines contain toxins and that by avoiding vaccines, children's immune systems will grow stronger on their own, school administrators, parents and health workers said.

“We do have a couple parents who feel that their children were fine until they got the vaccinations,” said Powers, the office manager at the Waldorf School of Bend.

Marcia Petersen, director of Circle of Friends Preschool & Kindergarten in Bend, said she shares the belief of some parents at her school that childhood illnesses strengthen children's immune systems. “Children used to get more fevers, and fevers seemed to strengthen the immune systems of the young children their whole lives,” Petersen said.

Petersen said she does not have up-to-date information about vaccine ingredients, but said one way to find out about toxic ingredients in vaccines is by searching Web sites. “I think people need to be encouraged to research, and a lot of these parents do their research.” Petersen chose not to get her two sons immunized, and when they went to college, she was dismayed to learn they were required to get vaccinated, and there was no longer a religious exemption.

Jason Friedman, a chiropractor in Bend whose children attend Amity Creek Magnet School, cited similar reasons for not immunizing his three sons.

“With the risks associated with vaccines, I'd rather just that my child get sick and we'll deal with it,” Friedman said. “I'd rather help them by making their immune systems strong, giving them the right kinds of supplements. With my belief system, everything you need is in (the body).”

Friedman and Amity Creek Principal Carol Hammett said many parents at the school take an active role in researching what has been written about immunization.

“Families at Amity are a little less willing to go with the flow,” Friedman said. “In general, the parents there are researching online, making their own informed choices and not necessarily just going with what everyone does based on fear.”

Some parents recently kept their children home from school because they worried a vaccine against the H1N1 virus, also known as swine flu, might actually spread the flu.

“We had two families that did not allow their children to attend school during the (H1N1) clinic because they were concerned about the mist vaccine spreading to their children,” Hammett said.

One concern at schools with high immunization exemption rates is that unimmunized students who travel to foreign countries where diseases such as polio are still more common could spread the disease to other unimmunized students at school, Hammett said.

Immunization backers

“Having just finished four or five years (working) on the west side (of Bend) where there are more than a few parents who are concerned about immunizations, I had the opportunity to talk a lot about them,” said Boehm, the pediatrician at Mosaic Medical Bend. Boehm said he does not hear concerns as often from patients at Mosaic Medical Bend, which provides free and low-cost medical care to qualified patients. “It tends to be well-educated, fairly well-off people,” Boehm said of parents worried about vaccines.

Boehm said the measles vaccine has side effects in rare cases. Yet, while the measles vaccine can cause brain inflammation and damage for one in a million people who receive it, the death rate for people who contract measles is one in 1,000, he said.

The controversy over whether measles, mumps and rubella vaccines are linked to autism began in the 1990s, Boehm said, at the same time more people gained access to the Internet and began looking for information online. At the time, research following up on vaccine recipients was limited.

“Since then, there have been numerous studies looking at it in numerous different ways that have shown it's not true,” Boehm said of any link between vaccines and autism. He said that vaccines do not overwhelm the immune system and called the idea that opting out of immunization will strengthen children's immune systems “the original red herring.”

Boehm said that independent investigators and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration have both conducted significant

research to ensure vaccines do not contain toxic substances. The type of mercury used in certain vaccines is a different molecule than the harmful type that can accumulate in fish, Boehm said. "If you get vaccinated with mercury vaccine, it's out of your body in a few days," Boehm said. "If you have a swordfish and salmon orgy and get the same amount of mercury, it may be years before you get it out of your system."

Boehm and Kaisner said one reason it is important for healthy children to get immunized is to protect children who cannot receive vaccines for medical reasons, such as allergies to immunizations or serious immune deficiencies that prevent them from receiving live virus vaccines such as for measles and rotavirus.

On the rise in younger children

While Deschutes County ranks high for exemption rates, data also shows parents of younger children are increasingly choosing to immunize them. Collette Young, research and immunization training manager at DHS, said that although Deschutes County's exemption rate has increased, so has the 2-year-old immunization rate. The county's immunization rate for 2-year-olds reached 74 percent in 2008, with a 1.9 percent margin of error, up from 54.4 percent in 2004 with a 2.3 percent margin of error.

"Overall, community protection is going up among the young ones," Young said. "Religious exemption data doesn't tell us specifically which shots (are not given), so we don't know where the vulnerabilities are."

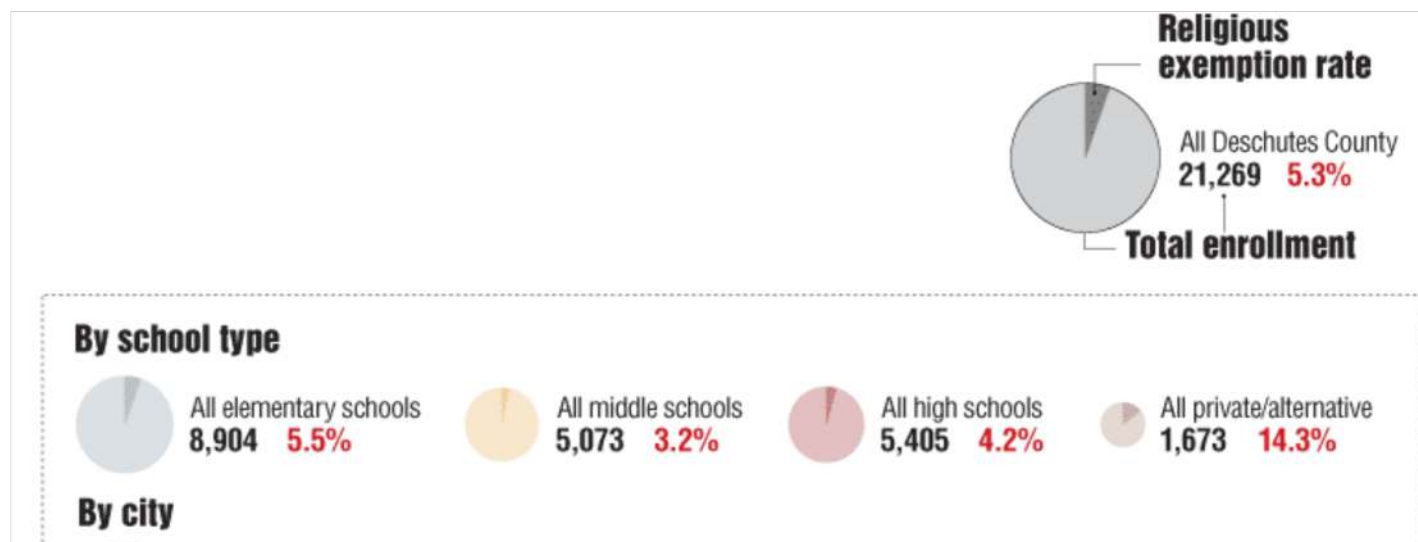
An exemption is recorded if a child's parents opt out of at least one vaccination, so the data for 2-year-olds also shows that a majority of children are receiving the shots recommended by their second birthdays, even if parents then choose not to get their children subsequent vaccinations.

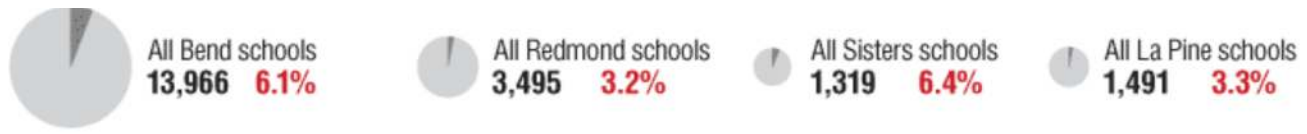
Powers, office manager at the Waldorf School of Bend, said many parents with children enrolled there fit that description. "Two-thirds of people who choose religious exemptions here have had some vaccinations, and it's the last round where they're saying, 'Enough,'" Powers said.

Hammett, the principal of Amity Creek Magnet School in Bend, said she would like the state to change religious exemption forms so administrators can gather better information about the real reasons parents are opting out of vaccinations for their children.

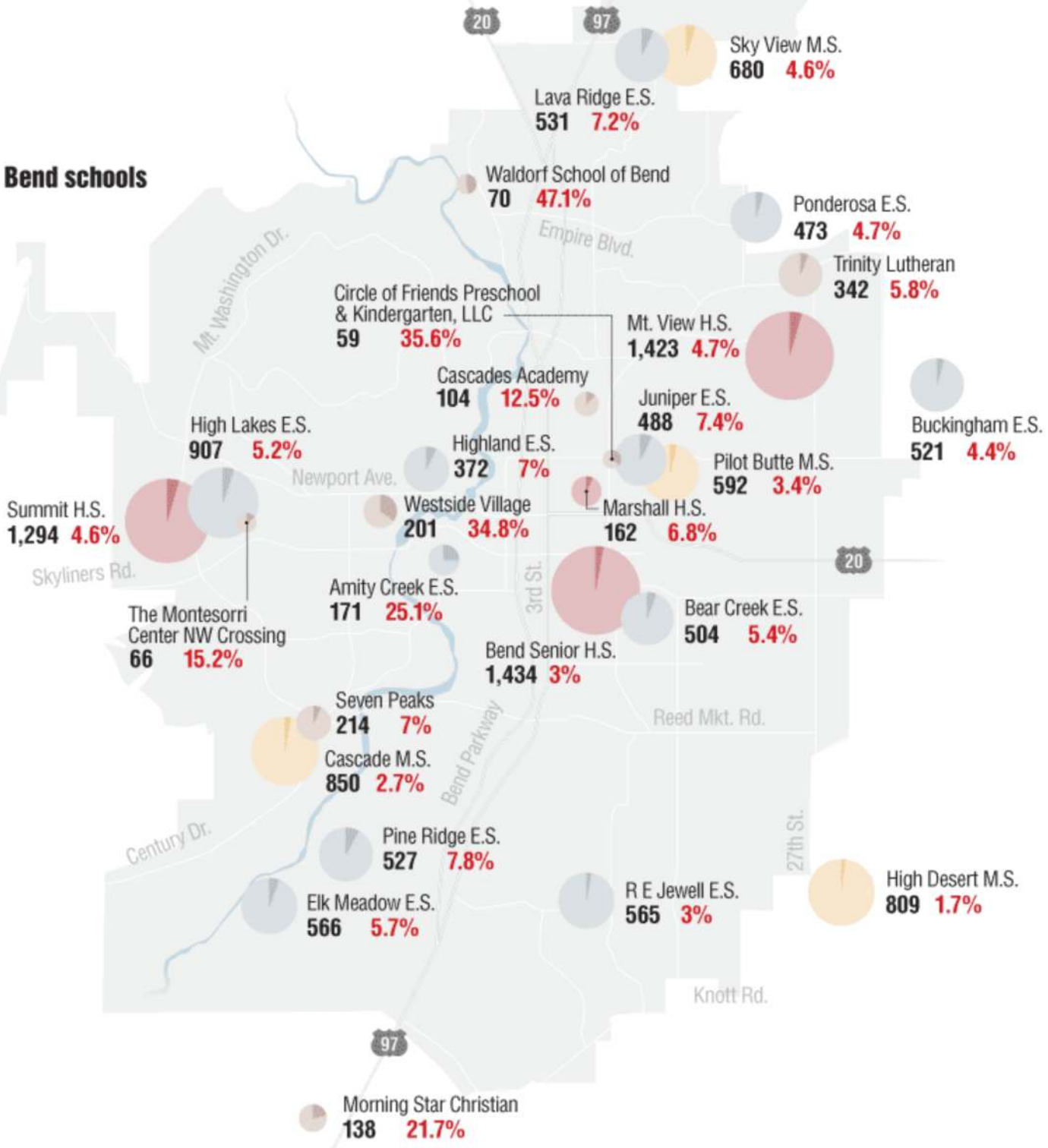
"I would love for the state to figure out a way we could have two boxes on that form, (one for) religious exemption and then just 'do not have my child immunized,'" Hammett said. "Policy-makers need to have all the information. ... In my nine years at Amity Creek, I can think of one family that truly checked that box because it was against their religious practices."

"It's always tricky to predict the future, but 2-year-old (immunization) data, they do continue to increase," de Assis Matthews, the state immunization school law coordinator said. "The challenge is as we learn more scientifically, more vaccines become available, so you're shooting (at) a moving target. Rates drop when there are more vaccines on the schedule or more are mandated by schools. The more we learn, the more opportunities we have to protect people."

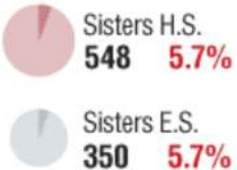




Bend schools



Sisters



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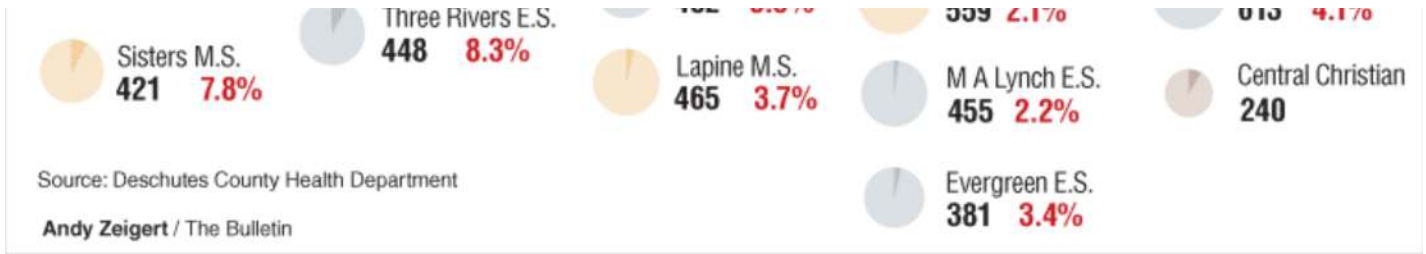


Redmond



Sunriver





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